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AUTHOR Bacharach, Samuel B.; Mitchell, Stephen M.
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INSTITUTION State Univ. of New York, Ithaca. School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell Univ.
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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews quality of work life as a management technique and argues that quality-of-work-life programs, conceptualized multidimensionally, offer a unique mechanism for improving working conditions in schools and within districts. A brief analysis of major management ideologies concludes that some techniques advocated under the label of quality of work life share the limitations of earlier theories, such as failing to consider a positive image of the worker as active and knowledgeable. Three quality-of-work-life themes--control, participation, and cooptation--are significant in school districts. Involving a reconceptualization of the fundamental elements of an organization, major aspects of a holistic approach to quality of work life are the integration of levels of analysis, the reduction of structure to action, the linkage of perception to behavior, and the interdependence and integration of actors in the organization. Broadly conceived, quality-of-work-life programs involve a process of diagnosis based on empirical data, intervention tailored to the specific needs of the organization, and evaluation. For further development of quality-of-work-life programs, issues including communication, supervision, role conflict, intergroup relations, physical work environment, participation, compensation, and career development should be considered in relation to various consequences of work itself, such as stress or job satisfaction. (MJL)

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OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES: THE QUALITY OF WORK LIFE IN SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

Samuel B. Bacharach and Stephen M. Mitchell

NYSSILR Cornell University

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Often it seems that the art of educational administration lies in the ability to create a sense of certainty out of the apparent chaos confronting school administrators. In their efforts to deal with the uncertainty generated by declining enrollments, unpredictable state budgets, vocal taxpayer groups, and a myriad of other factors, practitioners, as well as scholars in educational administration, have recurrently turned to the broader field of management and administration in search of techniques or concepts applicable to the issues they face. Unfortunately, those in educational administration have too often engaged in the indiscriminate and uncritical borrowing of techniques and concepts, adopting then without paying sufficient attention to their specific needs or the unique properties of their organizations. Through trial and error, many of these borrowed techniques and concepts may be adjusted to the specificities of school organizations, but frequently the end result has been an increase in the apparent confusion surrounding the administration of school systems and a certain cynicism among many concerning the applicability of outside techniques and concepts to the practice of school district management. Despite the fact that the landscape of educational administration is littered with the remnants of T-groups, management-by-objective, and the like, the search for new techniques and concepts continues unabated. One of the latest is the "quality of work life". While we believe that attending to the quality of work life can offer a unique opportunity to improve the management of schools and school districts, if not used properly, it will simply be another passing fad or cure-all. In order to enable administrators to make a knowledgeable decision regarding the applicability of the "quality of work life" to their school systems, this paper will present a brief review of what exactly it involves.

A Brief History

It is important to recognize that "the quality of work life" is not a specific technique, but a label haphazardly applied to a wide variety of techniques. Included here are surveys and the qualitative analysis of systems, quality circles, work redesign (including flextime and job sharing), sociotechnical systems and autonomous work groups, joint labor-management committees, and upward communication projects such as employee feedback and "open-door" policies. What all of these programs share, and what may be seen as the fundamental basis for the notion of the quality of work life, is a concern with the conditions of life at work.

This concern, however, is not new. Indeed, it can be argued that a concern for the conditions of life at work has occupied social and organizational theorists since the mid-19th century. It is with the writings of social theorists such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx that we first see such concerns arising. These authors were responding to the rise of industry, asking questions regarding the form these new organizations were taking and their impact on the social life and community of their time. Two common elements running through their observations are the increasing rationalization of work and the loss of a sense of involvement and community among workers. Appearing in various forms, these two elements capture the primary aspects of concern with the conditions of life at work to the present day.

For the early industrialists, the element of rationality predominated. Writers such as Fayol, and Gulick and Urwick emphasized the importance of a rational organizational structure to the success of the organization. It was these writers who elaborated principles related to the span of control,

functional departments, etc. The element of community was expressed primarily in the belief that the success of the organization was benificial to the society.

The element of rationality, with its focus on structure, continued to dominate in the work of Frederick Taylor and other proponents of scientific management. Where the classical management theorists focused primarily on the structure of the organization, Taylor brought the power of rationality to bear on the process of work itself, using time-and-motion studies to develop the one-best-way of performing each task. This approach is so rational that one is hard-pressed to find any trace of the element of involvement and community. In fact, insofar as the use of scientific management involved taking away from the worker the ability to decide how to do a task, scientific management may be seen as making a conscious effort to reduce the importance of this second element.

The neglect of this second element was forcefully brought to the forefront with the emergence of the human relations school. Beginning with the Hawthorne studies of Mayo, Rothleisberger and Dickson, the affect of informal social relations on work was brought to the attention of management theorists and practitioners. The element of involvement and community would not be neglected again.

Each of these approaches to management -- the classical, scientific management, and human relations -- is composed of both concepts for the analysis of organizations and techniques for managing organizations. Together, these concepts and techniques constitute a management ideology. As noted above, classical theorists were primarily concerned with concepts and techniques related to the structure of the organization, scientific management theorists focused on the process of work, and those in the human

relations school dealt with the social aspects of the workplace. Even today, specific techniques tend to concentrate on one of these three perspectives.

The use and development of concepts and techniques which employ multiple perspectives are few and far between. Those which do appear generally spend much of their effort trying to integrate the social element with the rational element. Two approaches to this problem deserve mentioning. The first merges the human and the rational by assuming that rationality is a property of the individual. This approach, which is based on the economic notion of a rational actor, investigates the effect of individual rationality on organizational structure and processes. Included here are the institutional school (e.g., Selznick, Gouldner) who focus on the impact of the environment and the role of self-interest in the running of organizations, and the information theorists (e.g., March and Simon) who are concerned with the impact of cognition, particularly in decision-making. Both of these theories tend to emphasize the political aspects of organizations. It is their use of rationality, however, rather than their concern with politics, that has been used to develop management techniques. In general, these techniques represent means of overcoming the individual's limited rationality (e.g., aids in decision-making).

The second approach to integrating the human and the rational investigates the details of the human element in order to devise techniques for integrating the individual into the organization. Primarily the province of industrial psychologists, this approach includes the study of such topics as selection, training, and motivation. The majority of the techniques emanating from this approach see the individual as passive, with a stable set of needs to be filled. The techniques focus on the conditions under which these needs

can be filled in hopes of insuring that the worker contributes his or her full effort to the organization.

Viewed as a cumulative effort, there is a consistent development in these various management theories. Focusing on the creation of management ideologies (i.e., concepts and techniques) which would enable organizations to function efficiently and effectively, we see in these theories a development from the application of rationality to structure and work process, thru a greater recognition of the role of the social element of organizations, to attempts at integrating the rational with the social. Insofar as the techniques which are now being advocated under the label of quality of work life can be traced to the concerns raised in these earlier managerial theories, then they are indeed "old wine in new bottles." As such, they share in the limitations of these earlier theories.

Q.W.L. and Labor Management Relations

One of the fundamental limitations of the various management ideologies outlined above is their general failure to adequately assess and deal with the responses of workers. Almost all of the techniques developed as part of these various ideologies has met with resistance on the part of labor. Although it is possible to see this resistance as simply the incalcitrance of workers, to do so ignores several basic problems inherent in the ideologies which give rise to antagonistic responses by labor. These problems center around the three themes of control, participation, and cooptation.

All of the management ideologies considered above share a common concern with providing management with control over the activities of the organization. Further, the purpose of this control is to increase the productivity of the organization. Thus the classical focus on

organizational structure was an attempt to develop principles which could be used to design productive organizations; the scientific management's concern with the best way to do a task was also aimed at productivity; and the human relations and other approaches dealing in the social element attempted to harness these aspects of work to increase productivity. The foundation of these assorted ideologies can be summarized in the following figure:

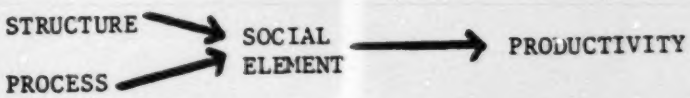

Figure 1: Foundation of Management Thought

Labor's resistance to management's efforts to gain control does not rest entirely on opposition to management having control. Rather, the basis for their antagonism is two-fold: 1) as we have seen, many of the management ideologies are dominated by the rational element to the neglect of the human element. Workers, when considered at all, are seen as passive objects subject to management manipulation. Not surprisingly, workers react negatively to this characterization and the failure to recognize the importance of the social element in the workplace; 2) Even those ideologies which recognize the social element generally fail to adapt a reasonable image of the worker. They still attempt to manipulate the worker as a passive object. It is this lack of genuine concern which labor resents. The end result of these problems in management ideologies has been the growth and development of labor unions or other manifestations of labor resistance.

Essentially, the bulk of labor's resistance, then, stems from the image of workers implicit in the various management ideologies. Labor proposes an alternative image in which the worker is seen as an active, knowledgeable person whose views should be solicited and seriously considered in running the organization. It is from this image that the theme of participation emerges. If one holds this more positive image of workers, it makes some sense that they should be allowed to participate in the decisions which determine the conditions of their working life. This line of argument is especially strong when we are dealing with professionals such as teachers who have a recognized area of expertise. They feel that their knowledge should be used as a resource, and that simply imposing structures or processes on them is an insult to their status.

Not surprisingly, management often views the call for participation as an infringement on their ability to achieve control over activities within the organization. On occasion, this may result in the adaption of techniques which produce the facade of participation without actually surrendering any control by management. The use of various types of teacher committees are often cited by teacher unions as an illustration of this. It is from these cases that the theme of cooptation arises. Potential resistance is eliminated through the appearance of participation. In reality, there is little difference between cooptation and the overt exercise of control.

In terms of the variety of techniques which fall under the rubric of quality of work life, the possibility of cooptation is critical. For the quality of work life to represent a truly new approach to the many problems of running an organization, the labor management relationship must be based on cooperation and trust. This means that the idea of participation must be taken seriously. It does not mean that management

must surrender its desire for control, only that they be willing to subject themselves to the same control they seek to exercise over others.

Of course, the three themes of control, participation, and cooptation are of particular significance in school districts, where in addition to labor, the school board and public also desire to participate. The potential diversity of groups seeking participation in the administration of the school system is a primary source of the uncertainty confronting school administrators. Traditional quality of work life programs, which have their foundation in a dyadic relationship between labor and management, may require some alteration before they can be applied to the reduction of uncertainty in school districts.

A Holistic Approach to Q.W.L.

The resistance of labor to the image of the worker implicit in the various management-ideologies is not their only limitation. The very conceptualization of organizations which forms the foundation of these ideologies (see figure one) is flawed, due primarily to its inability to adequately integrate the rational and social elements of organization. Any approach to the quality of work life which fails to take account of these flaws cannot realize its full potential.

First, any approach to the quality of work life must be able to integrate different levels of analysis, i.e., individual, group, and organization. To illustrate, consider teacher's stress. Stress on the job is an important aspect of the quality of work life. It is customary to examine stress as an individual phenomenon. In this manner, stress is seen as resulting from some aspect of the individual, and individual treatment is recommended. Although individuals may vary in their susceptibility to stress, it is important to realize that it is the organizational context

which acts as the stress stimuli, and that all of the teachers in a given school are subject to the same stimuli. It follows that the maximum benefit would come about from the elimination of stressful stimuli in the organization, rather than from treatment of individual teachers. Such a program must take account of the differences between elementary and secondary schools. For example, research has shown that high routinization is a predictor of stress for elementary teachers, but not for secondary teachers. It seems likely that the more bureaucratized nature of secondary schools would reduce the importance of routinization as a stress stimulus for secondary teachers. The important point is that this approach to stress successfully integrates the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis in a way not possible in the customary treatment of stress. It is this type of integration which is one essential aspect of a holistic approach to the quality of work life.

A second aspect of a holistic approach is the reduction of organizational structure to action. In the traditional conceptualization of organizations used by the majority of management ideologies (see figure one), organizational structure is seen as an independent, objective phenomenon which can be manipulated to effect individual behavior. Although there is some validity to this perspective, we feel it is crucial that one recognize that structure only comes into existence with the action of individuals in the organization. In other words, it is the action of individuals and relation between actors from which structure derives that is important. The study of job satisfaction provides a good illustration. Traditionally, job satisfaction has been an important consideration in studies on work life because it was assumed that satisfied workers will produce more. Research, generally based in some notion of needs, sought

to identify the type of structures which would foster need fulfillment. Recent developments have raised serious questions about this conceptualization. First, there is little evidence to support the idea that satisfaction results in higher productivity. Indeed, research suggests that higher productivity results in higher satisfaction. Following this line of argument, it appears that it is the impact of structure on task performance that is critical, i.e., it is structure as action on the job that is important. Structures which enhance task performance lead to satisfaction, structures which hinder task performance lead to dissatisfaction. Further, the type of structures which enhance or hinder task performance will be role specific. Thus we found that for superintendents, structures which enhanced coordination and the flow of information from the environment increased job satisfaction, while for principals contact with the environment decreased job satisfaction. The point is that it is the actions related to structure that are important, and not the organizational structure per se. Programs which focus solely on structure without considering how the structures relate to action will cause more problems than they solve.

As we have already noted, the majority of management ideologies view the worker as a passive object. The two aspects of a holistic approach we have considered thus far - the integration of individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis, and the reduction of structure to action - are directly related to a third aspect of a holistic approach to the quality of work life: the linkage of cognitions to behavior. In essence, this aspect recognizes the worker as an actor whose perceptions of the organization play an integral part in his or her behavior. For example, suppose we are concerned with turnover

among school board members. Research indicates that are specific types of perceptions which predict to whether or not a board member will choose to run again. Agreement with the current board or the perception that the administration does not have the influence necessary to follow through on programs will lead to a decision not to run again, while the perception that the teachers union should be more involved in district affairs or a perception of a dispute between the administration and the board over who should make decisions over control issues are directly related to the decision to seek another term. The important point is to recognize the linkage between perceptions and behavior, and to include an assessment of perceptions in any quality of work life intervention.

In presenting the first three aspects of a holistic approach to the quality of work life, we have used examples drawn from different roles in the school system to illustrate our points. In so doing, we hoped to demonstrate that quality of work life programs apply to the entire school district, not to a single role or group. Indeed, if the three examples given were pursued in more detail, it would become apparent that school districts as organizations are characterized by a high degree of interdependence, with problems related to the work life of one group tied to the problems of another group. For example, attitudes toward teachers unions will vary across school district hierarchies, depending upon how the union influences a given role. Thus teachers support the union; principals are sympathetic, but find the unions intrusion into their school disturbing; superintendents welcome the certainty a union brings, but resent the union's entrance into management affairs; and the school board is generally antagonistic to the union's monetary demands, while wanting more union involvement in student discipline and student rights. A recognition and consideration of this interdependence and the

differences in perception that accompany it are crucial to the construction of the dialogue which lies at the heart of quality of work life efforts. It is through this dialogue that all of the parties concerned are integrated into the organization and the quality of work life effort.

All of the aspects of a holistic approach to the quality of work life - the integration of levels of analysis, the reduction of structure to action, the linkage of perception to behavior, and the interdependence and integration of actors in the organization - involve a reconceptualization of the fundamental elements of an organization. The argument we are making is that this shift in theory is necessary if quality of work life programs are to succeed in practice. This shift would appear to be especially critical in schools, where their unique properties as organizations has led some organizational theorists to characterize them as "loosely coupled systems." We believe that while the limitations inherent in previous management ideologies may lead to such a characterization, if properly conceptualized school districts display an inherent logic that is anything but loose.

The Process of Q.W.L.

The emphasis in this paper is on the need for a broader conceptualization of what constitutes the quality of work life. Without such a broad conception, quality of work life programs are doomed to become another passing fad in the took kit of management techniques; with such a conceptualization, quality of work life programs may afford participants a unique opportunity to improve both the conditions of their life at work and the organization for which they work. Should the parties involved be amenable to this approach, then the actual process of implementing a quality of work life program could begin.

The basic process contains three steps: diagnosis, intervention, and evaluation. What makes quality of work life programs different from other approaches which employ this same three step process is: the emphasis on empirical data collection and what issues may be considered as part of this process. We believe that quality of work life efforts should be based in empirical knowledge of the particular organization. Only if data from the organization is used in conducting the diagnosis can the program be tailored to the specific needs of a given organization. In keeping with the emphasis on a broad conceptualization, any or all of the following issues relating to the structure of work may be examined: communication, supervision, role conflict and ambiguity, role overload, inter-group relations, physical work environment, participation, compensation, and promotion and career development. These issues should be considered in terms of their relationship to the various consequences of work itself: absenteeism and withdrawal behaviors, stress and burnout, forms of voice such as militancy, family/work conflict, and job satisfaction. Although any specific program may not consider all of these issues and consequences, it is critical that the quality of work life be seen as a multi-dimensional construct which involves all of these issues and consequences. Only a program based in such a multi-dimensional conceptualization is capable of being adapted to the specific needs of a particular organization. The quality of work life is not a generic program which can be haphazardly applied to any organization; it is a process capable of being adapted to the unique concerns of a given organization.

Because the quality of work life is a multi-dimensional construct whose process can be adapted to the specific needs of an organization,

it is not possible to say exactly what a program will involve. Programs will vary in terms of their content (i.e., the issues and consequences considered, and the specific type of intervention utilized) and structure (i.e., the precise degree of union involvement, and the scope and breadth of the program in relation to the entire organization). It is this flexibility that is one of the most appealing features of the quality of work life.

In the final analysis, the quality of work life as presented in this paper almost represents a fundamental approach to management. As such, it has aspirations of being a new management ideology, one which gives equal consideration to the rational and social elements of organization. In this regard, the end result of a successful quality of work life program should entail the institutionalization of the process of the quality of work life.

Conclusion

Throughout its history, the practice of educational administration has been subject to ever increasing amounts of complexity and uncertainty. As professional administrators, those in educational administration have come to rely on a variety of management techniques in an effort to cope with the complexity and reduce the level of uncertainty they face. In this paper, we have presented a brief review of one "technique" which is currently receiving a significant amount of publicity: the quality of work life. We argued that provided one is willing to adopt a multi-dimensional view of the quality of work life which requires a fundamental reconceptualization of what constitutes an organization, then quality of work life programs offer a unique mechanism through which to improve the

conditions of work life in schools. If one is unable or unwilling to accept the basic elements of this multi-dimensional perspective, then quality of work life programs are simply "old wine in new bottles." The choice is yours.